

Entertaining in Germany - Recollections of an Army Officer's Wife

After qualifying as a clinical psychologist I worked at Deva hospital near Chester. I was married with a baby daughter. Soon afterwards, in 1965, my husband, a newly-qualified medic, accepted a five-year commission with the Royal Army Medical Service, and we moved to Münster, Westphalia. We had a large, fully-furnished house and a cleaner/au-pair. I worked two mornings a week in the psychiatric wing of the British Military Hospital but otherwise I was an army officer's wife with quite a bit of leisure time. There was an expectation that officers' wives would entertain, not something I was used to doing back in the UK. I now needed to learn how to cook to impress.

Social gatherings took various forms. There were coffee mornings with cakes and biscuits, supper parties for around 16 guests, dinner parties (three courses and usually eight guests) and cocktail parties for upwards of 60 people. There were about three parties per week. On other evenings we might gather for drinks and then go out to eat at a local Bierkeller.

Food and drink was mostly bought at the NAAFI or at the local SPAR shop in the village. Cigarettes were readily available and nearly everyone smoked. Alcohol was very cheap - I recall buying a bottle of gin for 9/6 - and so we all consumed vast quantities, both at lunch-time and in the evening. Some of the officers became alcohol-dependent and the fear of joining them was one reason why my husband decided to leave at the end of the five-year posting.

Beef was expensive but pork, veal and chicken were cheaper. Sometimes we would buy at the Canadian NAAFI which stocked lamb and ice-berg lettuce; and occasionally we would buy something on a trip to Holland. Certain items were unavailable and had to be brought back from a trip to the UK - these included custard powder, baking powder, self-raising flour and marmalade.

When it was my turn to be hostess I would often take two days to prepare all the food. My 'go-to' recipe books included Marguerite Patten's *Cookery in Colour* and *500 Recipes from Abroad*; and *Good Housekeeping's Cookery Book*

A typical starter was cucumber 'candles' stuffed with salmon, or salmon mousse made in a plastic fish mould. (Number 82 in *Cookery in Colour*) Main courses were often 'meat and two veg' - I recall making a crown roast of lamb and also 'pollo a la romano' (essentially 'coque au vin' in white wine.) Desserts were extravagant and often involved whipped cream. I made 'croque en bouche', a pyramid of profiteroles. There were fruit flans and Baked Alaskas. The local quark (soft cheese) was used for cheese-cakes. Over the five-year posting I learned how to make 11 types of pastry!

On one occasion I laid on a supper party with an Italian theme for 24 guests. This involved importing eight card tables (standard issue for officers) which I covered with home-made gingham tablecloths with matching napkins. There was a candle in a bottle on each table! I cooked eight dishes of lasagne and bowls of zabaglione.

With the income from my part-time job I bought a Kenwood Chef, a Keymatic washing machine, an ironing machine with two hot rollers (good for things like sheets) and an electric floor polisher.

I learned recipes from various au-pairs and was taught Chinese cooking by the wife of the Officers' Mess cook. Mess cooks were highly skilled and Mess nights were party occasions where everyone dressed up. The buffet food was very special. I recall the cook serving two tongues, curved and decorated to look like a pair of boots! There were also curry lunches....

Whilst we were in Germany the UK stayed clear of military activity, save for skirmishes in Borneo and a garrison in Hong Kong. The army was in readiness for a possible incursion by Russian forces but this did not impact on the day to day life of the Army wives. The atmosphere was relaxed and we always seemed to be in a party mood. Things changed after we returned to the UK in 1969.

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